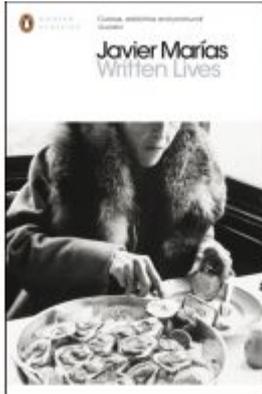


Written Lives by Javier Marías

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Translated by Margaret Jull Costa

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The great figures in literature always end up being eclipsed by their own work and reduced to literature. For the majority of us, Joseph Conrad is nothing more than the author of *Lord Jim*, Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of *Stories of Sherlock Holmes*, Robert Louis Stevenson, the author of *Treasure Island*, and the list goes on and on. They are total strangers to us.

Written Lives, the English translation of *Vidas Escritas* published this year by Penguin Modern Classics, is a collection of brief biographies of twenty-five writers. Javier Marías's aim is to go beyond the name linked to a certain work and to make each author known from a different perspective. Marías does away with the serious treatment that usually surrounds literary figures and presents an intimate portrait of their lives, which makes them more human. After reading every chapter, what stays in your mind is the image of the author in real life: Arthur Conan Doyle fighting in defense of a woman; Isak Dinesen eating oysters and drinking champagne; James Joyce clapping his hands over his ears, screaming and running because of his fear of storms... The aureole of their literary geniality disappears, bringing them back to our world.

Instead of the formal and structured shape that we would expect from a biography, every chapter is a little story that doesn't follow any logical structure. In the same paragraph we can read two or more different things about their daily lives, such as habits or anecdotes, that have no relationship between them, as in the following extract from the Henry James's biography:

While he was dictating his books, he would pace up and down, and when he ate alone, he would often leave the table and pace the dining room as he chewed his food. He very much liked being driven in a car and erroneously

believed that he knew the area very well and was blessed with an excellent sense of direction, which led him and the indulgent owners of various cars to arrive late at their destinations....

Each biography is a literary journey through the writer's life. Sometimes one forgets that what one is reading is real, or at least the majority of it as the line that Marías traces between fiction and reality seems to be very thin. At some points, Marías unexpectedly warns us about the legends that surround writers' lives and also about the tendency of some authors to make up stories, as in the following part of Malcolm Lowry Beset's chapter: "There is no doubt that Lowry enjoyed making up stories, so much so that no one would believe tales that were, in fact, true." This is followed by an anecdote about one night in which Lowry and a friend of his saw two elephants on the streets of London. They ran to warn people, but when they came back the elephants had vanished. Marías makes us aware of how difficult is to distinguish between fiction and truth and that sometimes fiction is the only real option we have left, leaving the reader in doubt as to the reliability of the content. In Nabokov's chapter, he mentions that the writer was proud "of his obscure literary antecedents." These antecedents were Kleist, Pushkin, Dante and Boccaccio, with whom some of his forebears had had "some kind of relationships." Although it seems to be utterly unlikely, Marías only adds that these four relationships seem to be an odd coincidence without denying a remote possibility.

Marías's aim is to make the reader forget the author, focusing every biography on aspects of his or her daily life that have nothing to do with their literary work. In Thomas Mann's chapter, Marías dedicate two pages to describe the writer's worries about the state of his stomach and his constant "sexual disturbances," citing along some lines of his diary that reports them: "My stomach hurts", "Indisposed, stomach upset", or "Yesterday, shortly before going to bed, I suffered an attack of the sexual variety, which had serious consequences for my nerves: over-excitement, fear, persistent insomnia, weakness of the stomach which manifested itself in acidity and nausea." Another example of banality in writers' lives is the following part of Nabokov's chapter: "He admitted that he wrote for two reasons: in order to achieve pleasure, bliss and rapture and to rid himself of the book on which he was currently working. Once it was started, he said, the only way to get rid of it was to finish it." Marías reveals an image that is not deformed by the idealistic lens through which we tend to see some literary figures, by taking them down from the pedestal in which they are placed by our collective imaginary and presenting them as people who also suffered from the same problems as we do.

The last part of the book, called "Perfect Artists," is a description of some writers' portraits from the "National Portrait Gallery" in London, among them there are Dickens, Mallarmé, Wilde, Poe and Sterne. As Marías says in the beginning of this part, "in our age, in which everything has its corresponding image," we feel uncomfortable if we don't know the authorship of something. Wilde is the model par excellence who defines our need to link someone's work to the head that composed it. He wanted his physical appearance to be appreciated as much as his writings, his features being

almost part of his work. This concern about physical beauty is pointed out by Mariás by saying that he poses in “the same way models in advertisements do now.” Far from the vanity that Wilde shows in his photos, the portrait of Sterne is the image of someone who dismisses the importance of his external appearance and is interested only in one thing: the intellect. This is noticeable in his finger pointing to his high and prominent forehead and in his gaze that Mariás qualifies as “one of the most liveliest” of his century. In each case, Mariás carries out a description that begins with the writer’s physical features but extends beyond the portrait, exploring their internal world. In Djuna Barnes’s part, the author compares her with Wilde, noting that unlike him she doesn’t try to look handsome, being “a woman dominated far more by modesty than by esteem for her own image.”

The book contains a lot of pictures of writers as they are an essential part of it. But only one, in my view, captures the essence of Mariás’s book, the one on the cover. In it Isak Dinesen is eating oysters completely absorbed as if she has forgotten everything around her. She looks very serious, staring down at the plate and waiting to open her mouth to savor the salty taste of the next oyster. Dinesen portrays the individual resting from their creative task and doing something that doesn’t imply the intellect. She is the image of the forgotten person behind the writer, without the literary shadow covering her identity: just herself.



Rafel Fernández studied Classical Philology at the University of Barcelona (Spain). He has published articles (in Catalan and Spanish) on Greek tragedy and Classical tradition. You can find his writing in Núvol and Fundació Palau. He lives temporarily in Bristol (UK) and is planning to move to the US in the near future.